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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, SCA/RA

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES MALDIVIAN PRESIDENT TO FINISH NEW CONSTITUTION AND ESTABLISH INDEPENDENT INSTITUTIONS TO SUPERVISE ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador and US Coast Guard Rear Admiral Bone met on May 19 with Maldivian President Gayoom on the margins of the "Partnering for a Safer Sea" conference hosted by the Government of Maldives at Sun Island Resort, Maldives. The President noted the need for a South Asian Regional Port Security Cooperative that focuses on maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean as it was "every country's common benefit to cooperate." He expressed optimism that the SAARC countries would be able to cooperate on port security matters. The Ambassador urged rapid progress by the Government and parties to finish and ratify the Constitution and then establish the independent institutions to ensure free and fair Presidential elections in the fall. The President responded that he would ratify the Constitution quickly and would welcome international observers. The President said the Foreign Minister planned to travel to Washington D.C. to inaugurate the Maldivian embassy in early July 2008, and asked that the U.S. reciprocate by opening its own office in Maldives. The Ambassador responded that we hoped to open an American Presence Post in Male in the fall of 2009. The idea has been approved in principle but funding has not yet been identified. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The conference was hosted by the Maldives Minister of Transport and Communication, and facilitated by the US Coast Guard. Septel will report on the results of the May 19-22 conference. Present at the meeting with President were Admiral Bone; Econoff Busa; Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Shahid; Minister at the President's Office, Ms. Aneesa Ahmed; Executive Secretary to the President, Dr. Ahmed Shareef; and Deputy Minister/MFA Abdullah Hameed.

¶3. (U) The Ambassador opened by expressing his thanks to the President and the GOM for hosting the conference. The Ambassador noted that some SAARC mechanisms had suffered due to long-standing mutual suspicions between some SAARC countries. Maldives was the perfect host for a conference on port security because of its good relations with all SAARC countries. Noting the President's long experience with SAARC, the Ambassador asked for his assessment of prospects for SAARC cooperation on port security.

¶4. (SBU) The President responded that there was a need to create a South Asian Regional Port Security Cooperative (SARPSCO) that focused on maritime security issues in the Indian Ocean as it was "every country's common benefit to cooperate." He expressed optimism that the SAARC countries would be able to cooperate on port security matters. The

President said that Maldives' biggest maritime concerns were drug trafficking and the need to improve its search and rescue (SAR) operations.

¶5. (U) Admiral Bone said the U.S. and Maldives had mutual areas of maritime interest and that both should look for opportunities to bring together the capabilities of their governments and maritime-related industries. He said the USCG would investigate possibilities to work/train with Maldives on various maritime concerns such as vessel safety, drug interdiction, human smuggling, environmental pollution (particularly oil spill response) and search and rescue operations (the USCG's "bread and butter"). Admiral Bone noted that all such activities fall under the scope of USCG Activities Far East located in Yokota Air Base, Japan under Commander Gerald Swanson.

Rapid Progress Needed to Prepare for Elections

¶6. (SBU) Turning to Maldives' upcoming Presidential elections, the Ambassador congratulated the President on the progress the Government and other parties have made in drafting a new Constitution. After four years of work, they remained on track but there was a lot to do before the elections, specifically the ratification of the Constitution and the establishment of the independent institutions to supervise the elections. The Ambassador urged rapid progress on these remaining tasks so free and fair elections could take place.

¶7. (SBU) The President responded that the key chapters of the Constitution had been drafted. It remained only for a

special drafting committee to review discrepancies and inconsistencies between the chapters. When the Special Majlis reconvenes on May 26, they have to discuss only a couple more issues before the Constitution can be sent to him for ratification. The President explained that the drafting committee chairman (Ibrahim Ismail) was currently touring the islands campaigning. The President quipped that "he (the chairman) should have finished (drafting the Constitution) before he began his campaign." The President estimated that the ratification process would take no more than ten days of the 90 days he is allowed under the Constitution, since he had already reviewed much of the new Constitution. Once the Constitution is ratified, the interim election committee will be formed. The interim election commission, Supreme Court and Judicial services all needs to be set up before the elections.

¶8. (SBU) In response to the Ambassador's query, the President and the Foreign Minister said that the new elections commission would decide on the date of the presidential elections. Noting that the timetable was short to hold elections before the deadline of October 10, the President indicated it would be possible to hold elections during Ramadan (September).

International Observers Welcome

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador told the President that several diplomatic missions in Colombo were looking into the possibility of sending election observers to join those of the Commonwealth. The President welcomed them and added that SAARC countries also expressed interest in sending an observer group. The President promised that the GOM would extend an official invitation to international election observers once the Election Commission fixes a date.

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¶10. (SBU) The President said the Foreign Minister planned to travel to Washington D.C. to inaugurate the Maldivian embassy in early July 2008. No date has been set yet. The

President noted that he would like the U.S. to reciprocate and have an official U.S. presence in Maldives. The Ambassador responded that we hoped to open an American Presence Post in Male in the fall of 2009. The idea has been approved in principle but funding has not yet been identified. The President concluded the meeting by thanking the Ambassador for the USG's assistance after the tsunami, and for the ongoing military and law enforcement cooperation.

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